

# COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.  
Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

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## When the Circus Came to Old Town

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**O**n the morning of November 17, 1871, New York City's Mammoth Circus paraded through Old Town's crowded streets; its caravan of lumbering wagons festooned with colorful banners and animal cages and surrounded by costumed performers and prancing horses. Circus posters and newspaper ads in both Spanish and English promoted the company as "The Great Show of 1871!" Some of the performers, including the owners William Thompson, an animal trainer, and Omar Samuel Kingsley, a Creole bareback rider, and the company's agents, Rowe and Wenban, stayed at the Cosmopolitan.

That evening Old Towners packed the Big Tent to watch some 50 performers dazzle them with a menagerie of horseback riding stunts

and animal acts. Admission cost a dollar for adults and 50 cents for children.

Kingsley, the company's star, was already a legend. He had performed in the capitals of Europe and in Japan, China, and India. His signature act was bareback riding dressed as a woman with the stage name, Ella Zoyara. Audiences thought he was a woman, a daring heroine who rode like a man. His slender physique and long curly black hair concealed his true gender—something that he managed to keep secret until 1867 when he ended up in a Manilla jail after brawling with some Spanish officers at one of his performances.

Three other performances were staged on Saturday afternoon and evening, November 18th and Monday evening, November 20th in New Town in front of the Horton House. The company then traveled onto Mexico on the brig *L.P. Forster*.

On the return leg in March 1872, it once again

performed in New Town and Old Town featuring new performers and new acts, including the "Stud of Horses," before enthusiastic crowds. Kingsley, Thompson, and their agents stayed again at the Cosmopolitan before the company traveled on to Los Angeles and San Francisco, and then headed East by rail.



Omar Samuel Kingsley, 1863

